

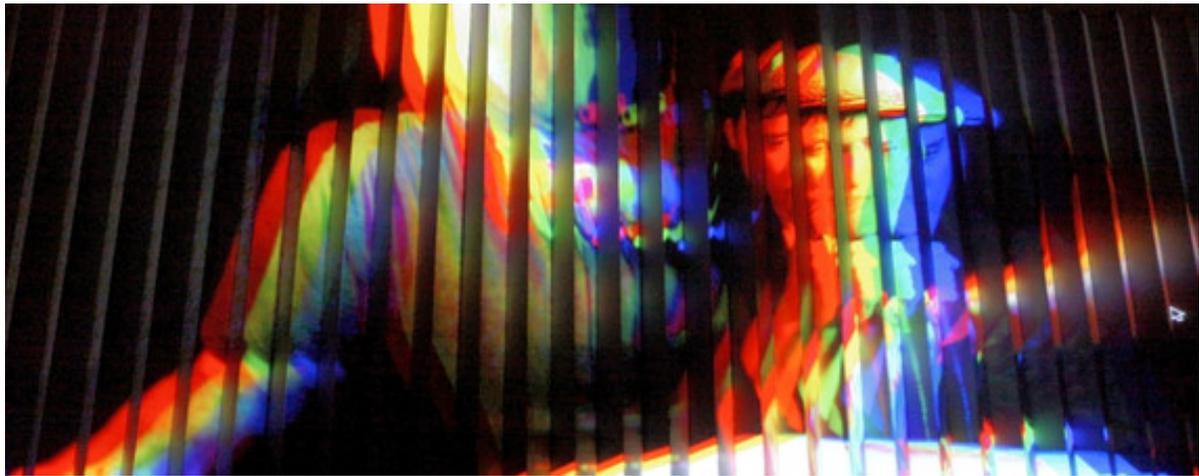
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Where Good Ideas Go to Live

Getting Creative With a Local Venture-Capital Fund for the Avant Garde

By STEVE DOLLAR



'Lenticular Wall,' from performance by grantee Complex Movements.

Vanessa Miller

When the downtown nonprofit Creative Capital announced on Thursday the recipients of its 2013 grants—\$4.1 million to be divided among 46 projects in sums of up to \$50,000, plus advisory services—the list highlighted many proposals that defy convention.



Philip Montgomery for The Wall Street Journal

Ruby Lerner, the president and executive director of the nonprofit Creative Capital, which announced the recipients of its annual grants on Thursday.

"You Are It", by Williamsburg choreographer Arturo Vidich and machinist Daniel Wendlek, proposes a performance, inspired by the schoolyard game Tag, for 3,000 dancers and a human-powered hybrid electric airplane, staged on an abandoned runaway in Long Island.

St. Louis, Mo., artist Juan William Chávez's "Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary" aims to transform the wooded site of a former housing project into a space for community beekeeping.

New Yorker Elaine Tin Nyo's "This Little Piggy" will document on video the lives, "from stable to table," of adoptive piglets in five countries, leading to dinners prepared by local chefs and a cookbook.

If these concepts seem to stretch outside the box—using artistic practices to transform exercises in technology, agriculture and gastronomy—they're quite the norm for Creative Capital. The organization has been shaking up the nonprofit arts field since 1999, when it was launched in the aftermath of the decade's culture wars as an experiment by Arch Gillies, then-president of the Andy Warhol Foundation, whose support abides in a 10-year matching grant of \$1.5 million a year.

(A full list of this year's grantees is available at www.creative-capital.org.)

It's not only the artists whose work challenges traditional notions, but the way the Creative Capital was designed: It's a venture capital fund for the avant-garde.



Juan William Chávez

'Pruitt-Igoe Bee Sanctuary,' by grantee Juan William Chávez.

terrain he once knew, the 2008 grantee began making time-lapse films that capture the growth of his produce. The project has expanded into an international enterprise.

"They talk about this catalytic moment, this Sputnik moment, in your career," he said. "To know that this is the right time to infuse capital. What does that mean? It's this network of people, it's advice, it's a structure, it's a methodology to apply to your practice to make you resilient."

Like other successful candidates in Creative Capital's open submissions process, Mr. Moore survived three rounds of evaluations to become a grantee. This year saw 2,700 proposals in three disciplines—performing arts, emerging fields and literature—whittled down to 700, then 216, before 46 projects (involving 66 artists) were approved by a final panel. As with the 2012 grants (awarded to artists in the fields of film/video and visual arts) there was a new filter used in the first two rounds of the qualification process: the "wild card."

Ms. Lerner was hearing, too often, refrains of "I'm not sure this person earned this," she said. "Wow. No, it's not about earning. It's about: are you excited by the idea?"

So she told application readers to pick two extra names after they were done with their initial selections, based on the imaginative zest of the ideas presented: "wild cards." That willingness to rewrite its own playbook has helped keep Creative Capital innovative. "What never ceases to amaze me is Ruby and company's willingness to change, willingness to establish practices and then harshly examine them ... to really take their cues from the artists," said Jeffrey Soros, a film producer and founding board member. "What makes it fun as a trustee is it's always an evolving

"No one was testing those ideas out in the arts arena," said Ruby Lerner, executive director of the organization, which rejected the standard nonprofit model of "here's a check, send us a report." Instead, there's a longer-term commitment, for up to five years, and an emphasis, she said, on "what will make someone stronger when they leave us than when they came in."

"It was—and I can't think of any other word for it—revolutionary for me," said Matthew Moore, the Phoenix-based founder of the Digital Farm Collective and a fourth-generation farmer. With suburban development gradually overtaking the rural

process. There's always an idea of: How can we take this to the next level? What's an appropriate way to grow the organization without losing the core of what we do?"

A board member since 2008, Ed Colloton, a partner at Bessemer Venture Partners, suggested that the venture-capital model inspired a creative process that serves artistic enterprise as ably as they do the launch of a new business. "A lot of the good entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, what are they good at doing? They're good at creating a story, and then getting people mobilized around a story and then connecting people," he said. "Ruby has a great capacity to do that, to connect people and help the artists to do that."

One of those artists, Mr. Moore, continues to consult with the organization's advisory team as he moves forward with his ever-expanding project, while also serving as a mentor to other artists in the grantee network. "The more we succeed, the more art succeeds in general," said Mr. Moore, who has become a catalyst on a home turf that isn't necessarily receptive to artists, let alone those exploring the frontier. "Even though I'm in Phoenix, it's not a detriment to my career at all. If anything it's a challenge, to be relevant in a creative space where that's not the norm."

Besides, he noted, "Once you get a Creative Capital grant, they put an electric fence around New York so you're not allowed to move there."

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